

Leo Luster

Name of interviewer: Tanja Eckstein

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The first time I encountered Leo Luster in Vienna was in Café Schottenring. Once a month the former Hakoah players meet there. Leo and his son, Moshe, were in Vienna for a film project on Aron Menczer. Aron Menczer was a young man who had made life bearable during an unbearable time for many Jewish children in Vienna and in the Theresienstadt ghetto, and saved many of their lives. In 1943 he was deported with 1,260 children from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz and murdered. He was 26 years old at the time. There is a memorial plaque commemorating him in front of Marc-Aurel-Strasse 5.

Leo Luster gave me his business card in Café Schottenring and invited me to visit the Austrian seniors' club in Tel Aviv. Years later I flew to Tel Aviv to conduct three interviews. Leo Luster was immediately ready and willing to give me an interview. I visited him in his apartment, and so began a wonderful friendship.



My Family History

My mother's family lived in Galicia, in the city of Brzesko [Poland]. Grandfather was called Berisch Teichthal and grandmother was called Feigel Cerl Dorflaufer. My grandmother was born in 1854 in Brzesko. My grandparents were married in 1876 in Brzesko. They married Jewish, so the daughters received the mother's name and sons the father's name. They had twelve children, eight of whom survived. I know three of them: my mother, Golda, who was born on January 18, 1892, her brother, Josef Benjamin, born on July 5, 1896, and Hinda Rifka, born on January 6, 1899 in Brzesko. Jacques immigrated to America; I could only visit him at the cemetery in New York. I have never seen my mother's other brothers and sisters. They stayed in Poland during the war and were murdered there. I know some of their names. They were called: Israel, Neche, Marjem, Leser Lipe, Abraham, and Jakob. Jakob was then Jacques in America, I suppose.

What I can say about my grandparents is only from hearsay – what my mother told me: My grandparents had a very happy marriage. My grandfather was a traveler who traded in soap. He bought soap in Germany and brought it to Poland with a horse and cart. When I was traveling around Germany I found out that my grandfather, who was very religious, always went to Rothenburg ob der Tauber, supposedly. Rothenburg ob der Tauber is an interesting city. The great Rabbi of Rothenburg lived there. He had a large yeshiva there and was very well known. And apparently my grandfather went to him because he was often away from home with his horse and

his cart for a half a year. Then when he came back, what did he bring? Soap! There was a soap factory in Rothenburg where he bought the soap, brought it to Poland, and then sold it. One of his brothers always accompanied him on this route. He probably had more brothers, I don't know, in any case he didn't travel alone and they always went to this rabbi. I learned that after the war. Things weren't bad for my grandparents; grandfather made a good living, more or less, with the soap.

I was told that my grandmother was a small woman who wore a sheitel. They admired her because she was very clever. Unfortunately she was diabetic. Even in those days the diabetics were sent to Karlsbad [*Karlovy Vary, today Czech Republic*]; the healing waters there also helped the diabetics. In any case grandmother always went to Karlsbad, to the health resort, in summer, and so I gather that grandfather could afford it. My Uncle Benjamin bought grandmother insulin for the diabetes in Vienna, but it was already too late for her, it didn't help. She died in 1924 and was buried in the Central Cemetery.

My grandfather died before the First World War. That's why at the end of 1914, before the start of the First World War, my grandmother fled to Vienna alone with her three youngest children: my mother Golda, her brother Benjamin, and her sister Rifka, who was only 15. It was easy back then since there weren't any borders. Vienna was the capital of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. And because the war was taking place in her region, my grandmother felt much safer with her children in Vienna. My mother's older brother, Jacques, immigrated to America at this time, or maybe even earlier.

At first my grandmother lived with her children on Tandelmakt-Gasse 19 [*2nd district*]. In Vienna my Aunt Rifka married Naftali Herz Lauer from Brody [*today Ukraine*]. Their son Alexander was born in Vienna in 1926.

My grandmother had a sister called Rojzie Dorflaufer. She was born in 1865 in Brzesko and married Naftali Benjamin Goldberg. She died in 1938 in Vienna. Her husband was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942. The daughter, Gittel Rifka Goldberg, who was born in 1886 in Brzesko, married David Teichthal in 1909. Both of them were murdered in Auschwitz. Their daughter, Sarah, died in 1986 in New York; she was able to flee.

My Uncle Benjamin was a clever fellow; the whole family was fond of him. He was athletic and politically active as a socialist and Zionist. He was a successful fur trader in Vienna. In 1925 he married Bertha Ladenheim, a very nice woman. Her father, Elias Elukim Ladenheim, was also a fur trader and had a large shop in the 20th district on Heinzelmänn-Gasse. Their daughter, Renee, was born in Vienna in 1926. Uncle Benjamin had a magnificent four-room apartment – it was a whole floor – in the 9th district at Glaser-Gasse 3 at the corner of Porzellan-Gasse. They also had a maid. I visited them often. I really liked it at my uncle's. My mother also loved her brother. He helped everyone and gave everyone something.

When Hitler invaded Austria, Uncle Benjamin became afraid. He locked up the apartment, left everything there, and ran away with his family. The maid had a boyfriend, an SS-Mann, who took everything. Uncle Benjamin had an accounts department in Innsbruck and the accountant smuggled them over the border into Italy. They were in Italy for about a year and then fled onwards to France and lived in Paris. It seems Uncle Benjamin had money abroad and so was able

to stay afloat during this time. From France they fled to the USA. The brother, Jacques, who emigrated from Poland to America, sent them an affidavit. That's how Uncle Benjamin could travel to America with his family and live there. Uncle Benjamin died of cancer in 1943 in the USA. Later Aunt Bertha married a Mr. Podhorzer. Their daughter Renee still lives in the USA.

My father's parents were called Leiser Isak Luster, born in 1849, and Ite Jütel, born Seitelbach, in 1855. Both of them were born in Jarosław [*Galicja, today Poland*] and lived there. I don't know when they relocated to Vienna. Grandfather was a peddler and died in Vienna in 1899, in the Karl Josef Hospital. Grandmother Jütel died in Vienna in 1923 in the 20th district at Hannover-Gasse 7 where she lived. She had seven children:

Sara Luster was born in 1875 in Jarosław. In 1901 she married Hersch Wolf Rosenbaum from Russia. Sara and her husband had two children: Alois Rosenbaum who was born in Vienna in 1903, and Dora, married name Sturm. Sara's husband died in Vienna on May 23, 1939 in the 13th district, in the Lainz almshouse. She was 69 years old.

The second child was Abraham Isak Luster. He died as a one-year-old in 1877 in Jarosław.

Michael Luster was born in Jarosław in 1879 and died at the age of two.

Simon Leib Luster was born in Jarosław in 1881. He lived with his wife Fanny, born Rubin, in Mannheim where he also died. Fanny was deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp and murdered. Their son, also called Leo, was supposedly able to flee. I never heard from him again.

Schulem Luster was born in 1883 in Jarosław and died in Vienna in 1913 at Hannover-Gasse 7.

My father, Moses Luster, was born on March 15, 1891 in Jarosław. He had another brother that lived in Jarosław with his wife, a daughter, and a son. I don't know what happened with them. I don't know if they were killed by the Germans or Russians. I never heard anything about them again.

My parents met through a shadchen [matchmaker]. That was a schidach [an arranged marriage], as you say in Yiddish. They were married in Vienna in 1920 in the Polish temple at Leopold-Gasse 29. I still have my parents' marriage picture.

My Childhood

We lived at Schrey-Gasse 12 in the 2nd district. Schrey-Gasse is a side street from Untere Augarten-Strasse. Approximately 70 percent of the people in our building were Jewish. The building belonged to a Jew, a Mr. Toch. I think Mr. Toch owned three houses on the street.

In our apartment there was a large room, a small room where my sister and I slept, and a kitchen. My sister Helene – we called her Helli – was born in 1921. I was born in 1927; I was six years younger than my sister. Helli looked after me a lot. We had a good relationship.

I went to a Jewish nursery school on Schiffamt-Gasse, which wasn't too far from us. My mother was at home, but they sent the children to nursery school. The nursery school teacher, a French Jew, only spoke French to us. That was probably quite modern back then. I knew a lot of French words as a child because of it. But I forgot it all later.

My father wanted me to learn all the prayers so I would be able to pray. That's why, starting when I was 4-years old, I went to the cheder every week on Nestroy-Gasse. The cheder was very close to our apartment. That's where I learned the Chumash [the Torah], the Alef Bet [*the Hebrew alphabet*], and to write in Hebrew. There were at least 20 to 25 Jewish children in my class, as a lot of Jewish families lived in my neighborhood. My parents had friendships with people in our neighborhood and we even had relatives nearby. Cousins of my mother lived across from us. I always got together with their children.

We could already very clearly sense the antisemitism back then. We played soccer on the street – there were hardly any cars back then so the streets were empty. The Christian children often came by and chased us or beat us up. We didn't have any good interactions with these children. Later we would never walk to school alone, always in groups, so that they couldn't attack us. That was simply the lousiest time in Austria. That was after the First World War, during the great economic crisis. People were talked into believing that Jews had money while poverty reigned everywhere else. There was great antisemitism. That was the mental beginning of Adolf Hitler.

In addition to his work, my father also had a job sometimes as a shamash [custodian] at weddings and bar mitzvahs at the Polish Temple. Uncle Noah, an uncle of my mother's, grandfather's brother, was the gabbai [assistant to rabbi] at this temple. Those were the people that ran the temple; he was a chairman of the temple, so to speak. And the husband of my grandmother's sister was also there. My father got this extra job from them. The Polish Temple was a very, very popular temple that a lot of people went to. They had a fantastic cantor there, a hazzan, who was very well known. He was called Fränkel. A lot of people came to honor him. There was even something published about him here in Israel; and I also wrote something about him. I really liked going to temple. There was also a choir there. That was very, very nice; it was an enjoyable service. We always went to temple on Shabbat; we were always with other people there. The Polish Temple was a center where people would gather.

For school we had to go to Shabbat services on Saturday afternoon. That was a requirement because we were given free time whenever the Christian children learned about Catholicism. That's how they balanced the time. Those services took place in the large temple [*Leopoldstädter Tempel*] on Tempel-Gasse. That was the largest temple in Vienna and it was already a bit progressive there.

For the first four grades I went to the Talmud Torah School at Malz-Gasse 16. That is a very religious school, which still exists today. Two years ago I made a film in Vienna with a few former friends. That was the first time since 1938 that I was in the school on Malz-Gasse again. During the war there was a hospital in the building; now there is a school there again. I began to cry when I saw it; I remembered everything. I saw the children in front of me – it was horrible! I still had contact with the teacher, Ludwig Tauber, in Israel. He was very Orthodox. I think he was a teacher on Malz-Gasse until 1939; he taught three classes. He taught everything there was to teach. He was able to flee to Palestine. He then lived in Bnai Brak in Israel. I learned that he was still alive and looked for him. He also came to my office. He came with my son to my office.

For the next four years I was at a secondary school on Vereins-Gasse and then I was at the High School on Sperl-Gasse. I was a mediocre student. I didn't work very hard though I understood quickly and was a fast learner. The teachers at the Christian schools always discriminated against us Jewish children. They gave us worse grades for our work. We were a minority. We were satisfied

if they left us alone; we were very patient. We had to make the best of it. That was our fate; we couldn't change it. After Hitler arrived I went to the JUAL School at Marc-Aurel-Strasse 5. That was a preparatory school for immigration to Palestine.

My parents went frequently to the Jewish theater. There was the Jewish Art Theater at Nestroy-Platz 1, which exists again today. There were always Jewish artists there. And the Jewish Stage was on Tabor-Strasse. There were many guest performances from all over the world in these theaters back then. Where the Hotel Central is today on Tabor-Strasse, there was a giant hall in the basement where many celebrations – weddings or Zionist gatherings – took place. Our parents always went there with us. Then there was a popular Jewish restaurant on Rotenstern-Gasse, the owner of which later opened a restaurant in Tel Aviv. Sometimes we went out to dinner there. When he died, his wife and son continued to run the restaurant.

And there was the Restaurant Marschak, a very good restaurant across from the Schiffschul [*synagogue in the 2nd district*] on Schiffamts-Gasse. That was a giant place. People went there for Kiddush. There was good food there, gefilte fish, for example. Then there was the very popular Café Buchsbaum on Kleine-Pfarr-Gasse at the corner of Große-Sperl-Gasse. That was a large coffee house where many Jews met and played cards. My father also played cards there. Then there was the large Jewish Café Sperrl, which was on Große-Sperl-Gasse at the corner of Haid-Gasse. I don't think it exists anymore. There were a lot of Jewish establishments in this area where Jews gathered back then; then you met friends outside.

My parents always went to temple on Fridays for Shabbat services. After service we often gathered at my Uncle Benjamin's, since he had a large apartment. There the whole mispoche [*Yiddish for family*] was together. The children were always there. If we went home after services my mother would prepare everything for us: soup, fish, and chicken. My mother was a very good cook. She lit the candles before the meal.

We had Passover dishware for Passover. That was kept in the attic and only taken down for Passover. The dishes would be swapped; my mother adhered to that very strictly and she did that since she was very kosher. There were a lot of kosher shops in our neighborhood. For example there was a shop on Haid-Gasse called Eisen. They made wonderful sausages! There was a Jewish grocery store on Grosse-Pfarr-Gasse called Wieselberg. If you didn't have any money you could get credit and pay later. You could get all the kosher groceries there. There was also a sort of strange coffee substitute with chicory. The Jewish firm that made it was called Frank-Kaffee.

Then there was the large store on Leopolds-Gasse where you bought matzo – that was called Strum. Sturm was a factory, a matzo factory; Strum matzo. The Strum matzo factory was a very well known factory. My cousin Dora, my Aunt Sara's daughter, my father's sister, married the son of the owner, Strum, in America.

We bought matzo for Passover, but it wasn't cheap. The selection wasn't as large as today. The Sephardic Jews were allowed to eat rice and legumes – the Ashkenazi Jews weren't. My mother made the noodles herself from matzo flour and various other things. She also made lekach [*honey cake*] from matzo flour or potato starch.

We felt fine until antisemitism grew. In 1936 a lot of our friends from our building immigrated to Palestine. Many Zionists had immigrated even earlier.

My sister joined the Zionist organization Hanoar-Hazioni very early – she had a somewhat Zionist attitude. Later I was a member of the Zionist group Gordonia. Aron Menczer was our madrich [*Heb. leader, guide*]. I was twelve when I joined the Gordonia youth organization. We went on field trips together, they told us about Palestine, and we were taught to be Zionists. They told us, “This is not your homeland, your homeland is Israel.” It was always my dream to go to Israel and even if Hitler hadn’t come I may still have immigrated to Israel. My parents didn’t have any problems with it – quite the contrary, they were all for it. I think my parents would have also immigrated to Palestine, since my mother and father were not Austrian patriots. If they compared their life in Vienna with their life in Poland, where they were from, things were better for them in Vienna. There was a big difference between their life in Galicia and their life in Vienna. My mother, for example, came from a very small town; I saw it after the war. This little town was very poor, there wasn’t much there. Vienna, on the other hand, was the capital. At the start of the First World War, the Jewish community in Austria had over 200,000 members. That was a large Jewish community. Many of these people did a lot for Austria.

The Jews who were already residing in Vienna looked down on us Polish Jews. They were assimilated. They were already Viennese and thought they were good Austrians – nothing could happen to them. They were afraid of increased antisemitism on account of the Orthodox Jews from the small towns who clearly looked so “Jewish.” All the Jews from Poland spoke Yiddish and not German. The established Viennese Jews really did not behave nicely towards the new immigrants. They were embarrassed by these Jews. But many of us really came a long way despite where we came from. I don’t say that in retrospect; we always felt that way. They also made us feel as though we didn’t belong. My mother spoke German with a strong Yiddish accent. She never wanted to go anywhere alone. Sometimes she went with my sister or me and we would speak for her and explain what she wanted. My father spoke better German than my mother and my Uncle Benjamin spoke flawless and beautiful German. You couldn’t tell that he came from Galicia.

My sister was an apprentice girl in a Jewish tailor shop at Rotenturm-Strasse 14. The building is still there. Because she had to deliver the goods, she got around in Vienna. My sister brought clothing to villas. She went into well-to-do houses where the ladies had their stuff sewn in tailor salons. These were Viennese Jews who’d been living in Vienna a long time and were already assimilated.

I went to the cinema a lot as a child. A distant cousin of my mother's owned a cinema on Untere-Augarten-Strasse where I could go for free; and in front of our building was the Rembrandt Cinema. I can still remember the films with Chubby and Dumb – that was Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. I also remember the Charlie Chaplin films.

My father liked reading the newspaper. Where do you go in Vienna to read the newspaper? To the coffee house! He was either in Café Buchsbaum or Café Sperl. There he drank a coffee and a glass of water, and read the newspaper. My father also liked telling jokes, and told them often.

During the First World War my father worked for the military police at the North Station [*Today: Praterstern*]. During the Hapsburg monarchy, the North Station was the largest in Vienna with important connections to Brno, Katowice, Krakow, and Lviv. For many immigrants from the Crown

Lands of Galicia, Bukovina, Bohemia, and Moravia, it was the gate to Vienna. My father inspected the arrivals there. He spoke a little Hungarian, a little Polish, and little Russian, and said he learned those languages in the military. He often told stories about this time. Back then a lot of food was smuggled in because people were starving. For example, women smuggled eggs under their hats, and once one of the military police officers hit a woman over her hat – you can't even imagine what happened there. That was fun for me to picture. My father was not a war enthusiast like many who became that way during the First World War. I don't know where he stood politically, whether he was a socialist – but I don't think so. My parents were mainly interested in things that had to do with Jews.

As a child I made a crystal radio with my friends. It was made from a coil, a crystal, and headphones. We could listen to the radio with it. That was very exciting. But my parents also owned a radio. We needed to hand it over after the German invasion. They took all radio devices away from the Jews.

Jews go to temple on Shabbat and after services there is a Kiddush where you get something to eat and talk. That is a Jewish custom, particularly in Vienna. After Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, many Jews from Germany fled to Austria. A few also came to the temple where my father was and talked about what was taking place in Germany. He knew they weren't making it up. But there were also many Jews that didn't believe them. They were sure that nothing of the sort would happen in Austria.

During the War

I can still remember like it was today. The 11th of March 1939 was a Friday. In the evening I was with my father in the synagogue. A neighbor stopped us on our way home from the synagogue: "Mr. Luster, come here. Something terrible has happened."

"What happened?"

"Schuschnigg stepped down."

When my father heard that the Austrian chancellor was stepping down, it became clear to him that our bad luck was now beginning. I can still remember his words exactly: "Now begins our bad luck." And that's what it was! Schuschnigg stepped down and on Saturday people were already walking around the streets with swastika bands, looking for Jews. Already on Saturday!

My father immediately lost his job after the German invasion. The Jews quickly understood that they couldn't stay any longer, that they had to get out. But that was a big problem back then. The Germans had already filled the government functions with their people – that happened fast, very fast. They even took over the police. They knew exactly who lived where, who was rich and who was poor. They surrounded the Jews and took everything from them. There were no more Jewish businesses; everything was over. My father wanted to immigrate to America. He thought my mother's brother would help us, but that didn't happen. Luckily he got a position as a steward in the Jewish community's welfare office. He was partly responsible for public welfare, since the Jewish community was supporting the Jewish people as much as they could.

My friend Edi Tennenbaum lived directly across from us. He was able to flee to England in 1939 with a Kindertransport. I never heard from Edi again. His parents were from Riga. I had another friend, Julius Nussbaum, who we called Bubi. His father had a tailor shop on Miesbach-Gasse, in the 2nd district. We went to the JUAL School together. Later I met his brother again in Tel Aviv. In 1943 my friend Bubi was deported from the Theresienstadt ghetto to Auschwitz, and murdered. The brother came to my office and told me everything. When he died I helped his widow get a widow's pension from Austria, since I worked for many years for a small organization – the Central Committee for Austrian Jews in Israel – that strove to get retribution from the Austrian state for Austrian survivors and their children.

On November 10, 1938, after the pogrom night, so-called “Kristallnacht,” my father was arrested and detained. Our apartment was on the third floor. In our building there was a basement apartment without light, without electricity and water, and without a toilet. That was a one-room apartment with a small corner kitchen. A man lived in this apartment, an illegal Nazi. He came up to our apartment and told us we had to evacuate our apartment. He threw us out. When he came, only my sister and I were at home. We needed to get our things out of the apartment – that which we could carry – and go to the basement. And then that's where we lived. We had a petroleum lamp there and needed to get water from the hall. I think it was my Uncle Benjamin who once gave me a camera. I liked to take pictures and took many, such as my parents in the area in front of that apartment.

When my father was let out it was a bit easier for us. He was pretty beaten up and told us why. They told him he couldn't tell anyone about his experience. They had beaten and tortured the people.

My father lost his job as representative.

We lived for about one and a half years in this basement apartment. My father went back to his job with the Jewish community. As the deportations began, my father was able to get a two-room apartment for us on Floss-Gasse. We no longer had to live in the basement apartment for our last year in Vienna. At this time my sister was already gone. In 1940 my father had the possibility – through the Jewish community – to put her on an illegal transport to Palestine. You had to pay money for it, people had to buy into it. She left Vienna in the autumn of 1940. She needed a passport and a visa. Then she went to Bratislava. In Bratislava she met her Czech husband, Israel Mayerowicz, a carpenter. They were married in Bratislava. My sister needed my father's approval for the marriage, since she wasn't yet 18. After some time the ship went from Bratislava, through Romania, to Palestine. That was a horrible odyssey until she, after many weeks, reached the port of Haifa. The ship was in a terrible state. The passengers were asked to transfer to the ship Patria, which was next to them in port. The Hagana [*paramilitary collective*] later blew up the Patria in port, so that the British couldn't send the refugees on to Mauritius. Only the ship was supposed to be damaged, but many refugees were killed. Luckily my sister survived. She had three daughters: Ruth, Ora, and Pessy. Israel died in 1988 and my sister passed away in Hadera in 2009. All three daughters live in Israel.

My sister had a lot of friends, one of whom was a distant relative. Her name was Stella Monderer. She immigrated to Palestine in 1936 and in 1938 came back to her mother in Vienna for a short time. But then she went right back; she had a Palestinian passport. Her mother fled to South Africa

where she survived the war. My sister remained in contact with Stella her whole life. A friend of my sister's was later a general and adjutant for Ben Gurion in Israel. But he was on a plane that crashed in Addis Ababa [*Ethiopia*]. His son came to my office once and I told him that my sister was a friend of his father's.

After my sister had already left, I was still in touch with her friends who had stayed in Vienna. All of these friends were deported to Poland and murdered.

My mother was a self-made woman. She always, in every situation, held her own. That's how it was later in the camp. She was always able to stand on her own two feet. She could also conjure up a meal out of practically nothing.

The Vienna City Temple was the only one left in 1940 – all the others had been destroyed. My father brought together ten people from the neighborhood – that is a minyan – and I had my bar mitzvah in our apartment.

Starting in 1940 I went to two schools: the one on Sperl-Gasse and, in the afternoon, the JUAL School, the youth preparatory school for Palestine at Marc-Aurel-Strasse 5. In 1941, once I finished the last class on Sperl-Gasse, they turned the school into a deportation center. I was 14 years old and in 8th grade.

During the time in which we Jewish children weren't allowed to go to school anymore, we had various teachers at the JUAL School. We learned primarily about Zionism. I read a lot back then, political books as well. I checked the books out of the school library. There were a lot of Sholem Asch books. Sholem Asch came from Poland. There is a Sholem Asch House in Tel Aviv.

I went to that school until our deportation. School was a blessing in those days; I was safe, had company, and was well kept. Some of my friends back then were Kurt Weigel, Berthold Mandel, Harry Linser, Berisch Müller, Walter Teich, Ehrlich, whose first name I've forgotten, Kurt Salzer, Tasso Engelberg, Georg Gottesmann, Ernst Vulkan, Heinz Beer, Kurt Herzka, Kurt Weinwurm, Trude Schneider, Thea Gottesmann, Gerti Melzer, and Shalom Berger. I was always with them on Sundays in the Central Cemetery, at Gate 4. We were allowed to play ball there, picnic, and behave like normal kids without restrictions.

I had the good fortune of having a father who worked for the Jewish Community, because that meant we were always protected somehow and wouldn't be deported to Poland, but rather to Theresienstadt. Many working for the Jewish Community were deported to Theresienstadt in 1942. We knew there was the ghetto in Theresienstadt, but we didn't know what was taking place there. We had heard of the concentration camps Dachau and Buchenwald since people had already been sent there starting in March 1938, some of whom were freed with a permit or affidavit. That's how we were able to learn a few things.

Approximately 100,000 Jews from Austria succeeded in fleeing abroad. People stood in a line in front of the former Palais Rothschild on Prinz-Eugen-Strasse, where Eichmann had set up his office, the "Central Agency for Jewish Emigration," from 1938 to 1942. That's where the Gestapo was. If someone wanted to emigrate, they first needed a stamp from there to be able to get out of Austria at all. And you needed a passport, which many people didn't have back then. For a passport you needed to line up at the police department. Then you had to go to the tax office in order to get a

confirmation that you had no tax debts. Then you needed to pay a Reich Flight Tax, without which you wouldn't get a stamp. Chicanery on top of chicanery! If you received a passport, then you ran from one consulate to the other in order to get a visa. People tried to get to England as butlers, gardeners, and housemaids. A few fled illegally to Italy; others fled to Belgium through Aachen, and then further to Holland. Some received entry into the USA. Then the Kindertransports to England began at the end of 1938. The whole time it was about getting out by any means! People tried everything. There were also Kindertransports to Palestine, which you could access with a certificate or patronage. It was really, really horrible.

My father tried everything to get me out of Austria. He had no luck. He wasn't able to place me anywhere. I had no opportunity to get out. Alexander Lauer, the son of my Aunt Hilda, my mother's sister, could help with the escape to England. Alexander was a year older than me. His family was very religious, and he got to England on a transport from Agudat Jisra'el – those are very pious people. His mother Hilda died of cancer in 1947. The urn from his father, Naftali Lauer, was sent to us in 1942 from the concentration camp Buchenwald. He was arrested in 1939 and deported to Buchenwald. We had to pay for the urn and then buried him in the Central Cemetery at Gate 4.

If I'm honest, I didn't want to go away. I didn't want to leave my parents alone. I grew up pretty fast during this time. I saw what was unfolding and was often around grown-ups so that I quickly understood what was happening around me. People sat together in apartments and discussed all sorts of things. You went to people's apartments because you were afraid to sit anywhere else. Coffee houses were forbidden, the cinema was forbidden, the theater was forbidden; "entry prohibited to Jews" was written everywhere. We couldn't even go to the park anymore. We couldn't sit on benches and we weren't allowed to ride the tram.

Starting in 1940, after I had finished school, I needed to register with the Labor Office. I received an employment record book and then had to work in a factory on the Rossauer Lände that produced things for the Wehrmacht. I still have the record book. The factory owner was called Weinzierl. I imagined that he would help me and that we wouldn't get deported. But he wouldn't help me. He only helped my father get work in with the Jewish Community. That was our good fortune.

There were fewer and fewer Jews in Vienna. Vienna was becoming "Judenrein" [*lit. clean of Jews*]. The transports left for Lodz in Poland, Riga in Latvia, Kaunas in Lithuania, Minsk in Belarus, Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia and other places where people were murdered. Within a few months, 45,000 Jewish men and women were deported from Vienna. By the time we had to go, there were only a few Jews left in Vienna. Those remaining were Mischlinge [*lit. crossbreed. Term used for people of Jewish and so-called Aryan ancestry*] and a few who earlier had held high-ranking positions in the Austrian Army. Only later were they sent away as well.

On September 24, 1942, we were taken from the collection point at Sperl-Gasse 2a – a former Jewish school – and led to open trucks by people insulting us, and then taken to the Aspern Station. They even threw tomatoes at us, and the Viennese yelled, "Jews get out!" That was the time when Germany was celebrating the most victories. They had already occupied France. I know that I was very sad about people's hatred. I didn't know what to expect. I knew that I wanted to get out of Vienna and that there were Jews in Theresienstadt. There are Jews there; whatever will be, will be.

We were on the train for two days. There were around 1,300 on this transport from Vienna.

Then we arrived in Bauschowitz [*Bohušovice. Today: Czech Republic*]. The train station was located three kilometers from Theresienstadt. We had to walk to the ghetto with our things.

Theresienstadt is a city, a fortress, built around 1780 during the reign on Emperor Joseph II. It was a garrison town where the families of soldiers lived. There were many barracks in the fortress.

Two walls surrounded everything and between them was a trench filled with water. The walls were each eight to ten meters thick and just as high. They were made of burnt bricks. The ghetto was monitored by the Czech constabulary under the command of the SS and administrated by the Jews themselves. I went through three Lagerführer [*lit. Camp Leader*] during my time in Theresienstadt, all of who were from Austria: SS-Hauptsturmführer [*captain of the SS*] Siegfried Seidl, SS-Sturmbahnführer [*major of the SS*] Anton Burger, and SS-Obersturmführer [*first lieutenant of the SS*] Karl Rahm. The SS people had an office in the center and lived in villas or a hotel outside of town, which became the Parkhotel after the war. Everyday they took a car to the office. The Czech Jews were in contact with the police. There were a few decent officers who sometimes brought over messages or things, and helped. You couldn't escape since the police were watching. The Czechs, rather than the Austrians, might have helped, but they were naturally afraid as well. Most of the SS people were Austrian; there were about eight of them.

In 1941 Czech Jews had to build the ghetto in Theresienstadt. And they were immediately the lords there. They had the power. They had good posts; we were the new immigrants, so-to-speak, and were given the worst positions.

Most of the Czech Jews – not all, but a large number – spoke German. The others were Czech patriots and didn't want to speak German. They didn't even want to speak German with us.

When we arrived, the Czech Jews, on behalf of the SS, took everything we still owned from us. Everyone was allowed to bring 40 kilos. I had a backpack and a suitcase. They took all the things to a large sluice where they were unpacked and appropriated for the people who were there.

At that time there were between four and five thousand people in the ghetto. They were still bringing in a lot of people from Austria, Germany, and later from Holland, from Westerbork. Much later Jews from Slovakia came. But most were from Germany. When I was in Theresienstadt the Jewish elder was a Czech named Jacob Edelstein. Our teacher from Vienna, Aron Menczer, knew Edelstein from the Hitler years, since he made frequent trips to Prague and had a good relationship with him. He knew quite a few people from Prague. Aron was on the same transport as my parents and me, along with around twenty of my friends from Vienna. Thanks to Aron we established a group with young Zionists. Because of him we were also given a better place in Theresienstadt where we could live together. Aron did all of that for us. We built beds, did cultural activities, someone taught Hebrew, we had professors that held lectures, there were musicians who gave concerts, there were theater performances – you could do everything. There was even a synagogue.

We had a lot of free time; the SS men didn't care at all. They only did one thing: starting in September, when we were brought to Theresienstadt, transports to the east began. There was a connection between these transports and the Russian offensive. The battle of Stalingrad had begun! The Russians started getting closer to the German Reich. That's when they started to send

people on transports to the extermination camps.

No one knew where the transports were headed. We only knew they were going east. But we didn't know where to. Sometimes horrible news trickled through, but we didn't believe it. We didn't know we would be exterminated in Auschwitz. We thought we were going to labor camps. But many were brought to Minsk, for example, where they were shot on the street. No one came back from those places. But we didn't know anything. Sometimes we received messages, postcards. People made up codes. When someone wrote such and such, it meant such and such. That's how we suspected things were happening there. But Auschwitz? The truth about what was happening there – we didn't know. But we were afraid.

We lived together at first; that was in an attic. It was horrible. We had nothing. But my mother could make something out of it. My father lived in the Sudeten barracks and my mother was given a different place with other women. But they could meet every day.

Through Aron I was given good but difficult work in the kitchen with the food transport. I basically distributed food. It was difficult, but a great advantage. Everyone had a food card for the day. Mornings there was a little bit of black coffee and a piece of bread, in the afternoon soup or something else, and in the evening we also got something. I had enough food, so I could give my card to my parents. I stole a lot of food – carrots and all sorts of things – and brought everything to my mother. Then she cooked; we didn't starve. But it was very, very difficult for those who only had their food cards.

Everyone had a large spoon on their belt. Whenever we ladled out of a barrel and the barrel was still standing, the German Jews would come with their spoons and scrape out the rest of the barrels. They were so hungry. It was terrible! If I'm honest, I have to say that we young people survived at the expense of the older people. What we stole, we stole from them. There were also a lot of people in Theresienstadt who died of hunger and other sicknesses, like typhus, for example.

Many people had a hard time adjusting to the terrible conditions. For example, the beds were bunk beds, and two people slept below with two or three on top. The ones who slept on top had it the best, since you could build something on top, like a table, for example. Married people also met on top now and then. There were situations there you can't imagine.

You could survive in Theresienstadt. But despite my good situation, I also got various sicknesses, like typhus. There were excellent doctors from Prague. My mother had a myoma [*a benign tumor*] and was operated on by a doctor, one of the greatest experts from Prague. She would have never otherwise been to a doctor that was so outstanding.

My father built roads. I always brought him food. My father smoked and sometimes sold his food for a few cigarettes. My mother was always angry when he bought cigarettes. But what could you do?

Our youth group really stuck together. Four young boys from our group were transported before us on a penal transport to Auschwitz. Later I learned what happened to them. They were all murdered in Birkenau.

I was in Theresienstadt until September 1944. Fourteen transports left – women, men, all the young people, our whole group that was living together. We were all on the same transport to

Auschwitz. My father was also there. I didn't know what was going on with my mother. During the two years I was in Theresienstadt, the Jewish forced laborers extended the tracks from Bauschowitz to Theresienstadt. The trains rode directly into the city. They sent us from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz.

We were to leave on Yom Kippur – that was on September 27th. But the engine broke down and they left us there. I can still remember: I went with my father to the synagogue. We prayed, fasted, and the next day we had to report to the transport. On September 28th we had to get into the cars and we left in the evening. It was night and we didn't know where we were going. They were cattle cars and only had a very small window. We watched where we were going, in which direction. Based on the direction we saw where we were going. We were headed east. I remember that we rode rather slowly through Dresden. I saw a little bit of the city. We rode through and kept going until we were in Silesia. We rode through Breslau [*Polish: Wrocław*] and arrived close to Krakow. We rode for two days and a night. Suddenly we heard screams – it was at night. The train rode slowly through a gate and stopped. The doors were thrown open, prisoners screamed, “out, out, out!” There were about a thousand of us on this transport. It was dark but all around us were lights, barbed wire, concrete, posts. There were signs on the barbed wire that read, “high voltage!” We understood that everything was secured with high voltage. Most of the Jews that were screaming at us were Polish Jews. They immediately took my watch: “Hand over the watch; you don't need it anyhow.” They took everything I still owned back then. It wasn't only me, they took everything from everyone. We didn't know what was happening to us. We were herded to a platform. It smelled weird. What is that smell? Something was burning. We didn't know what it was.

We had to stand in five rows – the whole transport, a thousand people in five rows – on the platform. A group of four, five SS men stood up front with dogs. We needed to walk past them and everyone was asked a question. I saw the SS man pointing to one side or to the other. The older people went to the left side, the younger people to the right side. You could think that the left side was for people who were assigned to lighter work and that those on the right side would have to do hard labor.

People often made themselves seem older so they could get easier work instead of getting sent to the right side. For example, a friend of my father's was a pharmacist. The SS man said, “What is your occupation?” “Pharmacist.” “We don't need that, left side.” If he had said he was still young, that he was a metal worker or something, he might have survived. That's how it was.

When it was my turn, the SS man asked me how old I was and what my profession was. “Electrician,” I said. I had to go to the right. Those were the questions from the SS people. We didn't understand what was even happening.

And I accuse these Jews – the ones we met at first when we had to exit the train cars – of not warning us beforehand of what was happening there. The other prisoners didn't help us, didn't say anything; everyone was on their own. They didn't say, “listen, there's a selection, act younger, say this or that.” They didn't tell us what was happening. They only wanted our property: “do you have a gold ring, do you have a watch” – they took everything they wanted. It was horrible!

I didn't know where my father was. I lost sight of him. A few hours later I saw the crematorium and the fire. We started talking to the other prisoners. We asked them where they brought the people

who were led from the platform. Someone said to me, “do you see the chimney and the smoke there?” They had already left as smoke. I was horrified! But I needed to believe it. I saw the smoke with my own eyes. And I smelled it.

The ones remaining were later brought to the Birkenau concentration camp, to the gypsy camp. There were many large barracks there. On the first day, everything was taken from us except for our shoes and belt. And then we had to shower. We didn’t know that our parents had been gassed in the place where we were showering. But this time water instead of gas came out of the shower.

After the shower we were given prison clothes. They were very thin and at that time it was cold in Poland, very, very cold. We were freezing.

The barracks had earlier been horse stalls for the Polish Army. There was a fireplace in the middle of every barrack, and the horses stood to the side. Instead of horses, they had built bunk beds there. There was a block elder who was responsible for everything. Sometimes they were criminals. Sometimes you were lucky because the block elder was a socialist. Many kapos were criminals. They also wanted to take everything we still had. They only gave us a little bit of food and took the rest for themselves.

In the morning we had to report for roll call, we were counted, we had to report again in the evening, and we were counted again, and often beaten.

When we arrived at the barracks we had to take off our shoes and line them up. In the morning all the shoes were gone, not a single shoe left. You just have to imagine, there was snow on the ground and we didn’t have shoes any more. Everyone was stealing shoes from each other. Without shoes, if you got sick, you were finished. Birkenau was ghastly! I understood very quickly that you weren’t to stay there; that wasn’t a place you survived. Prisoners told us that you needed a tattooed number in order to survive Birkenau. If you didn’t have a number, you weren’t worth anything. You were fair game; they could do what they wanted with you. I realized I needed to get out of there. If you stayed in Birkenau, you were fuel for the crematoriums.

The Polish Jews spoke Yiddish. I listened carefully and understood that SS men were coming; they were looking for experts. My friends and I stuck together, then SS men really did come looking for metal workers. We all signed up. We weren’t taken the first time, but we were the second time. We were six friends and were all sought out for work. They gave us better clothes and we got a number tattooed on our arm. That meant we were people. We received blankets, were brought to the train, and rode from Birkenau to Gleiwitz [*Gliwice, Poland*]. That was after three horrible weeks.

My friends Otto Kalwo, Heinz Beer, Kurt Herzka, Georg Gottesmann, Ernst Vulkan, and I stayed together. We stuck closely together. Gleiwitz was a German city back then. Today it’s in Poland. Gleiwitz was a large city and was about fifty kilometers from Auschwitz. There were four satellite camps to Auschwitz there. The guards in the camp were from Romania, German Transylvanians. They were even worse than the Germans. Those were horrible people. They took us to a factory where they repaired railway cars. That was a giant factory! In large halls were about ten cars, one behind the other. There were maybe twenty tracks there. The cars were damaged and we had to repair them. They showed us what we had to do. We had to slice the rivets. We did that with welders. It was really hard labor all day. I wasn’t a metal worker, but I learned quickly. It was cold.

You can't imagine. Every piece of iron was very heavy and cold. We worked in shifts: once during the day, once at night. We were given food and we could also shower. But it was difficult and it wasn't heated. There were a lot of people in the barrack, so it was a bit warmer. Everyone had time to go out, but you had to sign out, then they made sure that you didn't run away. We worked six days a week and on the seventh day we didn't work. And in order to keep us busy, they had us report to roll call on the seventh day. Then we had to carry stones from a spot that was one kilometer away into the camp, and then carry them back! That was so we couldn't relax.

I made a sort of pot out of iron during my welding work. Many of the other prisoners who were working on the cars brought me a couple potatoes, cabbage, and all sorts of things – whatever they found in the cars. We weren't animals: you can't eat raw potatoes. We needed to cook them. They would bring me the potatoes and I cooked them with the welder and then got a share. This food was able to keep me afloat. Sometimes we found a few newspaper sections in the cars. We were able to read that the Russians were outside Warsaw. But we didn't know exactly... and suddenly we received the command that we weren't to go to work. Everyone got half a piece of bread, a can, a bit of margarine and jam. Blood pudding is not kosher. You aren't allowed to eat it.

We had to march. That was a death march. SS men accompanied us the whole time. There were somewhat older people from the Waffen SS, soldiers who weren't on the front any more. Some of the guards were decent, others weren't. It was very, very cold; it was still winter. We had no warm clothes and bad shoes. We walked, walked, walked... where to? We didn't know. We walked every day; many kilometers. They shot whoever stayed back. We walked for three days. We weren't given anything to eat. At night they brought us to a compound somewhere and we'd immediately fall asleep from exhaustion. We were cold; we were practically lying on top of each other. That's how we slept, one warming the other.

At the end of the death march we reached Blechhammer [*Blachownia Śląska, Poland*]. There was a giant hydro plant in Blechhammer where the Germans made gas and artificial rubber out of coal. A lot of war prisoners were working there. But there was also a large concentration camp in Blechhammer. That was an Auschwitz satellite camp. There were French people, Yugoslavians, American pilots, Englishmen, even a group of British pilots from Palestine who were imprisoned in Crete. They brought us to the concentration camp. That means they brought us there overnight. I can still remember a large roll call square and about twenty barracks. That was the beginning of February 1945. It was terribly cold; a very cold winter. I found an British Army uniform that I put on. The wool of the British uniforms was incredibly warm. They brought us to a barrack and it was our luck that there were boxes filled with bottles of soda water. We didn't have that much space. My friends from Vienna and I had stayed together. The others were brought to the other barracks. We fell asleep, dead tired. And then in the morning, again: get up and report to roll call. We constantly had to line up and be counted.

We decided amongst ourselves not to line up at roll call, since we heard what they were doing there. The people who couldn't walk or were tired were shot. Why should we get ourselves shot? We didn't leave our barracks. If you were going to be shot outside or here in the barracks, it would be better here. Why should we trouble ourselves along the way? Outside they yelled "Out! Out for roll call!" We didn't go, we didn't report ourselves; we hid in the barracks. But the SS men noticed that a lot of people were hiding, that they weren't coming out. So what did they do? They began

lighting the barracks on fire.

They threw burning torches onto the roofs and the barracks began to burn. They people couldn't breathe and ran out. Those who ran outside were shot like rabbits. If you were lucky, you could make it to the roll call square. If you weren't, you were shot on the way. We didn't run out. Our barrack also began to burn. The soda water bottles saved us. We poured the soda water onto the fire the whole time, and we survived.

They shot people the entire day. Then they were gone. It seems they got scared. The people who reported to roll call, I later learned, were put on trains at the station and sent to Gross-Rosen. There were then still a few people, like us, who had hid in the camp. Many had injuries and died from them because they got no help. We stayed for two days. We had nothing to eat; we were hungry. But we didn't dare leave; we stayed in the barracks. It was calm outside.

Then, on the third day, we slowly opened the door and looked out. We could see the gate through which we'd arrived. The gate was open and there weren't any SS men in the guard towers. I left the barracks and others also came out. There were people there who'd been in the camp for a long time already. They knew in which barracks you could find food. We all went and broke open the barracks. There was bread and I took as much as I could carry. I was just about to leave the barrack with the bread when suddenly an SS man was standing outside with a machine gun, gunning down the people. I didn't know what to do. A pile of people was growing. They were all lying on top of each other. I just threw myself on top of them with my bread. I lay there and he kept shooting. Suddenly he stopped shooting. There were no more bullets and he got scared, since there were many of us and only one of him. At that point he ran away. I slowly dug myself out of the pile of people. Some were dead or wounded.

I took the bread and brought it to my friends. So we had something to eat. It was very quiet. My friends and I had bread and water. After a few days Otto Kalwo and I already had a bit more energy and we wanted to know where we were. We left the camp. The others, Heinz Beer, Kurt Herzka, Georg Gottesmann, and Ernst Vulkan stayed in the barrack. They were too weak to come with us.

The camp was surrounded by a very large and very dark forest. You could barely see it was so dark. We walked along a street that went through the woods. All of a sudden we heard the sound of motors in the distance. We thought the SS was coming back and we hid in the woods. We came upon a hill. You couldn't see us from the street, as it really was very dark. We saw a motorcade approaching very slowly. I said to my friend, "Listen, these cars don't look like the cars from the Germans." They were a bit different. But we weren't sure. They kept getting closer and we could then clearly see that they weren't German cars. I learned later they were American trucks. The Russian Army received these cars from the Americans. Now we understood, since we could see there was a large red star on the hood, a Soviet star. They were Russians! We walked out onto the street with our hands up. The first car stopped. A soldier with a fur hat got out. That was the first time I saw a Russian. He wore a fur hat with a Soviet star.

I saw that he was also scared. I didn't know what to say so I said "Yid, ya. Yid, yid." (Jew, I. Jew, Jew) He looked at us and said, "ya tozhe yid" (I am also a Jew). It became apparent he was a Jewish officer and could speak Yiddish. Many of the Russian officers were Jewish; they could be used as interpreters. We were therefore able to speak with him. We told him that there was a camp. Then

his company occupied and took over the camp. The Russians were very decent. Little by little they brought everyone out and looked after them. We stayed there for two more days. We were given food and the officer told us there was a small settlement near the camp. That's where the German engineers who had worked in the large factory in Blechhammer had lived. It was about one kilometer away from the camp. My friends and I went there and just set ourselves up in a villa. There was everything there, since the Germans had left everything and ran away. There was food being stored in the basement: preserved meat, vegetables, and fruit. Everything was there except for bread. There also wasn't any water or dishes. We went from one house to another and took dishes. Whatever was dirty was thrown out the window. That was really valuable porcelain, but we had no relation to that stuff anymore. We got water from melting the snow. Some of our friends got diarrhea; that was dangerous.

We stayed in the villa for three weeks. We had a *meshuggene* [Hebrew/Yiddish: *crazy*] life there, as they say. The officer visited us frequently. One day he came to us and said, "Friends, you need to leave, you can't stay, because we're afraid the Germans are going to start a counter-offensive and you could fall into their hands again. Head east into Poland." And we left. He was the commander.

We loaded everything we had onto a cart and carried along some other things. One of us, Georg Gottesmann, was sick. He had dysentery. We pushed him in a wagon because he couldn't walk. It was all very difficult, but we walked many kilometers eastwards. Partly we walked and partly we could take the train. The Russians had extended the tracks so Russian locomotives could drive on them. They built the tracks as far as Posen. We quickly learned how to ask the engine driver where he was heading. So we were able to ride along and go partly on foot. There were still Germans in Upper Silesia, in Gleiwitz [Polish: *Gliwice*], for example. They had an uncanny fear of us. We took everything from them, we threw them out of the apartments, they had to serve us. Then we were in Kattowitz [Polish: *Katowice*] and then took a train to Krakow. You had to pay for everything with money in Poland; they didn't give us anything for free. But where were we supposed to get money? We sold a few things, a jacket, a hat, etc. We got money for it. There was a Jewish Committee in Krakow at 38 Długa Street. From the Committee we were given Red Cross identification cards, but otherwise they couldn't help us much, since they also didn't have anything. We befriended a few Jews from Poland. The Russians were very distrustful, the Poles as well. They could have thought we were Germans who'd run away. So we always had people who could testify to the fact that we were Jews and thus protect us. We only understood a few words of Polish, but that wasn't enough to communicate. We stayed close to our friends so that they could speak for us. We stayed for a while in Krakow. The Russian Army set up a sort of collection camp. We could sleep there and they gave us food. We had nothing. We had sold all of our things, our clothes. It was enough for us to be able to eat and sleep. That was already something! We could see the city of Krakow from our camp and went to the cinema for the first time after the war.

The Russians kept marching forward, over the Oder River into Germany. That was already in March. At the beginning of April the Russians said to us that they set up a camp near Sagan [Polish: *Zagan*], not far from the Oder. In February they had captured the city in Lower Silesia, situated between Cottbus and Breslau.

We were taken to Sagan by train. There was a large Displaced Person-type camp there. There were already Yugoslavs, Frenchmen, and people from all sorts of countries there. We could sleep and eat

there. Sure, we didn't have clothes, but a friend was a good tailor. We had a nice sewing machine there and found bales of material. But our friend only had one needle for the sewing machine and it broke, so he couldn't sew. So what did we do? We went into the city and searched the whole town for a needle for the sewing machine. We found one in the end. Not just one, but a whole packet. All the Germans had run away from there and left everything behind: the houses, the apartments, the shops, the factories. The Russians made it really easy: When they found a factory, they knocked down all the walls and took everything, even the machines. In the apartments they took out all the windows. They took everything and brought it to Russia. And whatever the Russians did, we did too. We took everything we could. Our friend sewed underwear for us from the bales of cloth, as we didn't have any. Then everyone had plenty of underwear. He also sewed T-shirts for us. Time went by. We were in Sagan for all of April and May.

There were also gypsies there. We didn't have much to do and so we had them tell our fortunes. I still clearly remember, the gypsy said to me, "You have a mother!" I said, "yes, I had a mother." She said, "You have a mother!" She also said a lot of other things and she said to two other friends, "You have a mother." We didn't believe it. We knew that it couldn't be.

After the War

Time passed, May 8th came and the war was over. The Russians came to us and said, "The war is over, go wherever you please. You can do what you want. You are free, really free!"

And what did we say? We weren't too far from Berlin; we wanted to go to Berlin. We looked for a train headed to Berlin. As luck would have it, we were brought to a train that took us to Cottbus. There was a great big train station in Cottbus. The Russians had laid wide track as far as Cottbus; the trains only went that far. There they had just started laying track to Berlin. We looked for a way to get to Berlin. All of a sudden we saw a boy at the train station with an armband that said "KZ Theresienstadt." My friends and I were sure that the Theresienstadt concentration camp had been dissolved and that everyone had been sent on trains to the extermination camps. We were one hundred percent sure. We went up to the young man and asked, "Theresienstadt, are there people there?" He told us that people were brought to Theresienstadt from all possible camps. There were thousands of people in Theresienstadt. When we heard that, we told ourselves that instead of going to Berlin we would go to Theresienstadt. And that's what we did.

From Cottbus we took a train to Dresden. We wanted to go to Bauschowitz from the Bodenbach border station. Bauschowitz was the train station of Theresienstadt. We were able to convince a conductor to take us without money, since we didn't have any. We got off the train in Bauschowitz. As former Theresienstadt inhabitants we knew the way on foot; it was three kilometers. That's how we'd arrived from Vienna back then. So we walked the three kilometers from Bauschowitz up to the fortress of Theresienstadt. We weren't being forced, we were there of our own free will! Sigi Ritberg couldn't walk anymore. We had a wagon and so we carried him.

Stop, the Czech police didn't want to let us in. The camp was under quarantine; there was typhus. We tried to convince them to let us in. We found a compromise in the end: we would go in, but wouldn't come out. They let us in under these conditions. We reached the main street of Theresienstadt. There I met an older gentleman. As luck would have it, this older gentleman was a friend of my father's. He worked with him in the Jewish Community and was with me in Gleiwitz. He

was a barber by trade. To be a barber was a good job; we always needed to have cut hair in the camps. I had seen him in Gleiwitz. He looked at me, and I looked at him, and said, "How did you get in?"

He said, "You're alive?" He briefly told his story: He was also in Blechhammer, but then had to go on to Gross-Rosen. From there they brought him to the Buchenwald concentration camp. I told him that we were in Poland, that we already had a whole world tour behind us. Then he said to me,

"Have you already been to your mother's?"

I looked at him. Where, where is my mother? He said, "I've seen her. She is here!" I said, "But how can that be?" "You can believe me, I've seen your mother here in Theresienstadt." He didn't know where she was living, but he said that I would definitely find her. He had seen her.

I knew where I could find out. I asked where my mother was living. Somebody gave me the address and she really was living there. She was living with a friend in an attic, a woman from Vienna whose son I was friends with and who was killed in the camp.

I don't know if you can imagine how it was back then. I climbed up to my mother in the attic and she looked at me. Can you imagine that? Well, the first question she asked me was, "Where is dad?" I couldn't say anything and she said, "God has bestowed this upon me, your being alive." Then she said that she had been told that someone had seen me in Krakow, which she didn't want to believe. It was like that: Georg Gottesmann, one of our friends, had become very sick. When we arrived in Krakow, Georg had a fever. He had tuberculosis, as it turned out. So we did the following: we brought him to the hospital and then went away. The next day we looked for him in the hospital. There, in the hospital, I met a Czech man who had been a Madrich in Theresienstadt. He was also a patient. I found out from him that our friend had been admitted to the hospital. My mother received this news but she couldn't believe that I was still alive. Our friend Georg was later transferred to Gauting, a suburb of Munich.

There was a tuberculosis sanitarium there. As luck would have it, we found out about it and immediately went to visit him, which helped him a lot, of course. Our friend had nothing in the hospital, only the clothes he wore after the liberation in Poland. I provided him with clothes, which by then was easy for us. We provided him with everything we could.

Back then we learned everything through word-of-mouth. That happened very quickly and then everything would be published in the camp newspaper. We published a newspaper in Deggendorf. One of our friends was even a newspaper editor. That's how we knew so much. That's also how Georg got the message that his mother and sister survived the war. But they weren't in Vienna; they were somewhere in Hungary.

An older gentleman lay next to Georg. His wife was my cousin. She always came to visit her husband. She often saw Georg alone and so asked him where he was from. Georg gave her his whole story. She then said to him she had a cousin in Vienna, she didn't know him but he must be Georg's age. Then she asked him if he knew a Leo Luster, per chance. "What a question," Georg said, "I grew up with him." Through him my cousin got my address in Deggendorf. She was the daughter of one of my mother's sisters. She lived in Berlin for years. In 1934 or 1935 she was deported from Berlin to Poland. I didn't know her, but my mother did. My cousin was very pleased

that my mother was alive, since she was the only one of the siblings to survive.

My mother's friend, Mrs. Ehrlich, who lived with her in the attic in Theresienstadt, asked me, "What is with my son, Emil?" I said that I didn't know. I knew exactly. He was no longer alive, but I couldn't say that. I didn't have the heart.

My mother and I received an apartment and my mother began to provide for me. She was overjoyed that I was there. Though, in the mean time, I had had a huge life experience and witnessed a lot.

During the time we were taken from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, Benjamin Marmelstein was the last Jewish elder in the Theresienstadt ghetto. From that moment he was the most important man within the Jewish self-management in Theresienstadt. Robert Prochnik, also a Viennese Jew, was his deputy. When we got to Theresienstadt after the end of the war, Marmelstein wasn't there anymore, but Prochnik was. The Russians had appointed a Communist as head of camp. I think it was someone named Vogel. Prochnik was a bit afraid of us, since a lot of things that took place in Theresienstadt back then are still difficult to judge. *[Note: After the war, Robert Prochnik was accused of collaboration because of his work for the Jewish Religious Community – he cooperated with the "Central Office for Jewish Emigration" on the preparation and realization of the deportation transports. A lawsuit that was filed against him in 1948 was taken up again in 1954 and then finally abandoned in 1955. Robert Prochnik died in 1977. Source: DÖW/Internet]* In any case he was afraid of us and helped us out with a lot of things. He gave us an apartment where we could live and sleep. We didn't go without food. Then the Germans from the Sudetenland, who had to clean, were brought to Theresienstadt. We had to keep an eye on them. I bullied them quite nicely, these Germans. Most of the Sudetenland Germans were for Hitler, that's why I took my revenge on them.

In Krakow I was with a couple of Austrian Communists who had been in Auschwitz. They went back to Vienna. A new government had been established in Vienna. The Social Democrat Karl Renner was the president from 1945 until his death in 1950. I didn't want to go back to Austria. But my mother had entrusted a Christian woman with a heavy gold chain with a watch and other jewelry before our deportation and hoped to get the watch and jewelry back, since we owned absolutely nothing. That's when my friends and I decided to go back to Vienna. That was almost impossible at the time because you couldn't simply go over the border. We were told the only possibility was to take the train from Prague to Bratislava, at which point you could maybe go over the pontoon bridge the Russians had built to Hainburg, and then go to Vienna from Hainburg.

We then really did go to Prague and from Prague to Bratislava. There we went to the Jewish Committee; I had learned in Krakow to ask the Jewish Committee for help. We went to the Jewish Committee and said, "We are from Vienna and want to go back, how do we get there?" They said that a couple of Russians were on guard down by the bridge. You can go across if you give them vodka. They organized vodka for us. We went to the Russians, gave them vodka, and then were allowed to cross the bridge on a truck. The bridge shook a lot and the Danube had a quite a strong current. On top of which there was the meschuggene soldier. But we made it across and were in Austria, in Hainburg.

There were six of us: Walter Fantl (the only one of the group to stay in Vienna), Siegfried Ritberg, Heinz Beer, Oskar Weiss, Kurt Herzka, myself, and two older men who spoke Russian, one because

he had been in a Russian prison during the First World War. The other was our interpreter.

We then hitchhiked to Vienna with a Russian truck. Our driver was a little drunk and a Russian officer was driving behind us and wanted to pass, but our driver wouldn't let him. When he was able to pass, he wrote down the number of the truck. We arrived in Schwechat where there was a roadblock by the Central Cemetery. There the officer pulled our driver from the truck. He saw us and determined that we didn't have authorization for the Russian zone. We said that we didn't need authorization, since we are very familiar with Vienna. The roadblock was in front of Gate 4 of the Central Cemetery. We went along the cemetery wall, climbed over it, and went through the cemetery to the other side. And then we were in Vienna. They had just done work on the tram tracks, so we could ride into the city.

Return to Vienna

Vienna had been badly destroyed. But it gave me a pleasant feeling that they had destroyed Vienna. The people went around looking for wood for heating in the bombed-out buildings, because they had no coal. They took water from the hydrants. Nothing was working.

The offices of the Jewish Community were on Deutschmeisterplatz Square. We went there and told the people there we could help re-build the Community.

Then I went to the family of the woman my mother had entrusted with the jewelry. And what did they say? The Russians had taken everything from them. But I didn't make anything of it.

Then I went to the building we lived in on Schrey-Gasse. I knew that the superintendent had worked both sides of the fence – one day she was for us, the next day against us. But my father had given her all of our furniture. We weren't allowed to sell anything. He gave everything to her. I wanted to visit her – maybe she was still alive – and went into the building.

The new superintendent said she was no longer there. And who was the new superintendent? It was the district chairman of the NSDAP [*Nazi Party*]. He had always fetched me to shovel snow and to do other low-grade jobs. Now I was wearing a British uniform – without high ranking – since I only owned this uniform and no other clothes, plus it was cold in Vienna! The Austrians both feared and had great respect for Allied uniforms. I arrived as an British soldier, so to speak, at the building where I had lived until I was fourteen years old. I had, of course, aged in the meantime. The superintendent had a window through which he could see who came into the building. I recognized him immediately, but he didn't recognize me. He looked at me and shook before the uniform.

"You don't know me?" I asked him, "I'm Luster."

"Yes, so you're still alive!" Through the superintendent's window I could see my parents' bedroom.

"You know who that belongs to?" I asked him. "That belonged to my father."

"Your father gave everything to me."

"That isn't true at all," I said. "You took the furniture from the former superintendent. My father gave them to Mrs. Schlicksbir, not you." Suddenly everyone from the building came. Word had gone around that an British soldier was in the building. Then I went to the 3rd floor, to the man who

had taken away our apartment.

Honestly, I didn't want to be there, not in Vienna. In Krakow I had met a Russian boy who was working for the NKWD. His name was Grischa and he spoke very good German. Grischa wanted to make a Communist out of me: "Come to Russia, you will study, you will have everything!" As fate would have it, I met Grischa in Vienna. He was sitting in the Augarten Park where the NKWD offices were; that's where I met him. We both delighted in the encounter.

"Can I help you?" He asked me. I told him I wasn't going to stay in Vienna. Then I told him the story of our superintendent and the man who forced us from our apartment.

"If you can retaliate in my name, do it."

I don't know what he did but he was going to do something.

I didn't want to stay in Vienna – I couldn't look at it any longer.

The return trip to Theresienstadt was also quite an adventure. First we drove in a rental car over the border near Ludenburg. That was also illegal, since the borders were all blocked. Then we made it to Prague and from Prague to Theresienstadt. I told my mother that Vienna was not for us.

"We have no business in Vienna. Whatever we had to leave behind we've lost forever."

In the mean time we had contact with my sister in Palestine through the German Red Cross. Prochnik came to us and said there was a possibility of getting to Palestine. He got in touch with the Joint in Paris. They could bring a group from Theresienstadt to the American sector in Bavaria if we were interested. I immediately agreed, since I knew that wherever the Russians were was no place to immigrate to. It was impossible! You couldn't emigrate from Vienna. Everything was blocked. You could emigrate from the territory where the Americans were.

The Americans helped a lot. The Russians also helped a lot, but they didn't have the chance, they themselves didn't have anything, they were also starving. Prochnik really did give us the chance to travel to Bavaria. That's how we arrived to the Displaced Persons camp in Deggendorf. The transport went by train through Pilsen, as far as Deggendorf. That isn't so far away. There were old Wehrmacht barracks in Deggendorf. They set up a camp there. I still have the list of all the people who came to Deggendorf; many former Viennese people from Theresienstadt and a lot of Germans were there.

Deggendorf

We had a very nice time in Deggendorf. We stayed there for four years. I began to work, initially for the aid organization UNRRA – the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Later the IRO [*International Refugee Organization*] took over this work, and then I worked for the Joint [*American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – a US-American Jewish aid organization for Jews, active since 1914, primarily in Europe*]

I lived with my mother in a large room in the barracks. We lived well, I had a good job, I had my mother and a few friends. There was a motor pool there. We transported everything the people in the camp needed with the UNRAA cars. And we kept the cars in order. Later I was also responsible

for a larger motor pool for the Joint in Straubing, and then later I worked for the Joint in Munich-Schleissheim. I had a car, a Jeep. I was given as much gas as I needed and could drive around in Germany. Back then it wasn't yet possible to travel to Israel. The state of Israel was only founded in 1948, and you could enter legally starting in 1949. My job was good, I made good money.

The whole time I was in contact with my sister, and my friend Harry Linser who had travelled illegally to Palestine in 1946 and later got a good position at El AL. Harry, who was also in Theresienstadt, was a great athlete. He was able to illegally immigrate to Palestine from Vienna in 1946. He is still living here. Back then he wrote to us, "don't rush, you don't need to come yet, you still have some time." Most of the friends I'd been with the whole time, also friends in Deggendorf, immigrated to America. From Deggendorf it was easier to immigrate to America than to other countries.

Georg Gottesmann, who had been taken to Gauting to be cured, went from Munich back to Vienna after we learned that his mother and sister had survived. But he didn't stay in Vienna. He then immigrated to America. He had a relative there – Otto Preminger. He was a director with Film Exodus. Georg then also worked in film. He was in Tel Aviv in 1953 and participated in the first Maccabi Games [*Jewish Olympics*].

Georg's sister Thea was a childhood friend of mine and was also in Theresienstadt. She was a pretty girl; all the boys chased after her. I am still in contact with her. She lives in America. She is like my sister. That's the nice thing: all the people who were together back then are like brothers and sisters.

My friend Shalom Berger was a good-looking boy. He survived both the ghetto and the concentration camp and was in the DP camp with me in Deggendorf. He was an intelligent boy, worked on the editorial staff of the newspaper we published, worked for the Joint, and then did his doctorate in America. Then he killed himself because of his wife. That is truly horrific! How do I know that? The university director found my address at his place, because I was corresponding with him. Then he wrote to us.

The State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948. It was pretty difficult back then, of course; there wasn't anything there. It was a very poor country. The British didn't leave much behind and didn't invest that much money. They took out as much as they could. The British were not good colonial rulers.

Israel

My mother and I came here [to Israel] on a ship from Germany. We went by train to Marseille. And in Marseille we were in a little camp for one, two weeks. That was a sort of turnover camp. From there we traveled by ship. We rode on an Israeli ship under the Israeli flag. That was, of course, the first time either of us had ever seen a ship with a large Israeli flag. We even had cabins and were given food. That was a terrific journey! It really was a wonderful trip. All of us – there were about 100 people on board – were very, very eager. The voyage took around five days. On the last night we didn't sleep. We danced; everyone wanted to see Haifa as it appeared. Around five in the morning we approached the coast. We saw the lights in the distance. That was a great moment – a wonderful sight! We slowly got closer and then rode into harbor. The ship rode to the landing site and we got off.

We saw Haifa from below, Mt. Carmel, the beautiful buildings! It was inconceivable for us. A lot of buildings in Haifa were built in the Bauhaus style. The British invested a lot in the vicinity of the harbor they had built. The entire harbor district was filled with British offices associated with the ships.

When we were collected from the harbor we had to fill out forms and everyone was given a certificate of immigration. And the moment you received a certificate, you were an Israeli citizen. Then they brought us to the buses parked down by the harbor. There were a lot of buses. They took us to the St. Luke's immigration camp. It was known under this name. It was once a giant camp from the British Army. After the British left, the Israelis turned it into an immigration camp. There were a lot of barracks, so they could easily accommodate people. Later they changed the name to Sha'ar haAliya [*Gate to Aliyah – immigration to Israel*]. Today you can't recognize it any more; it's no longer there.

Everyone was given a barrack. I lived with my mother. But I desperately wanted to go to my sister. I had her address and I had British pounds from the cousin I met in Germany. He succeeded in illegally immigrating to Palestine through Romania in 1944. But then he went back to Germany in 1946. He wanted to do business there. In those days things were not going well here. We met in Germany. He already had money, and always supported us when we needed money. My sister wrote us in Germany asking if we could bring some things with us. We brought a refrigerator and since my brother-in-law was a carpenter, we bought him machines for his workshop. We could bring in everything duty free. We dropped it off in Germany and sent it here

I had pocket money and had someone explain to me how to get to Hadera. I then took a shared taxi from the camp to Hadera and looked for my sister's address. It was very hot then and I remember that it was July 6, 1949. She lived really far from the main street. The house was like a barrack; half a house. There was no electrical light, the toilet was outside – water, too. You needed to buy ice for the refrigerator back then and you had to cook with petroleum. Everything was really quite primitive here.

She lived there with her husband and two daughters. Our first encounter is difficult to describe. I recognized her immediately from the photos she sent us in Deggendorf after the war. It was a great joy – very, very moving. She had left me – I was still a small boy then, just six years old. And I came to her as a young man. That is difficult to describe.

Then I met my brother-in-law. We had only seen pictures. He worked very, very hard back then. They had to begin with nothing in Hadera. Those were hard times; it was difficult to earn money. But my brother-in-law found good work. They made the scaffolding for the new buildings out of wood and they lay brick on top for the roofs. The framework was made of wood. That's how he got started. Working on the roofs in the sun was very, very difficult. But he was a very hard-working man. After two days with my sister, I went back to my mother at St. Luke's. My sister was not pleased with our living there and she rented a room with a little kitchenette for us not far from her. We relocated after two weeks. Back then every new immigrant received an iron bed, a blanket, a thin mattress, and couple of other small things from the Jewish Agency. Later you had to pay back the money. I didn't know that. We signed and they gave us the stuff. You needed the iron bed at the beginning, but later you didn't need any of it anymore. My mother and I were then living better than my sister was. We had light, and the toilet and water were inside. When my mother saw how

my sister was living she was shocked. We were from Europe, after all. It was such a huge difference. It was very difficult for her to understand that my sister had to live so poorly. So my mother always said, “you need to do something, you can’t stay there.” My brother-in-law then took out a loan, bought property, and slowly began to build a little house. Back then I was already earning some money, which I then gave to him. He built the house in two or three years. Then moved in before it was finished; there was no electricity yet. But they were living better than they had been. The house became really nice. There were even orange trees in the yard. The house is still there today. Both my nieces, Ruth and Pessy, inherited it.

Every Saturday my mother and I went to my sister’s. But I saw that Hadera, a city from the time of Rothschild, was a dead city. There was no life there and nothing changed. I didn’t want to stay there. It wasn’t for me. I knew a young woman and her friend from Theresienstadt, who my friends and I smuggled into Deggendorf with fake papers. They were Poles, but they also spoke Russian. They voluntarily signed up for the Red Army and served as nurses under General Zhukov. One later worked as a nurse with the Joint and met a Polish Jewish dentist who studied and lived in France. I had heard that he had begun working for the OSE [*Obshchetsvo Zdravookhraneniya Yevreyiev, Organisation for the health protection of Jews*], a Jewish relief organization, after the war in France. And I had heard that they had immigrated to Israel, since the OSE had opened a branch here. And what’s more, I had heard that he had come to Israel with a mobile dentistry clinic. At that time they were looking for someone to who wanted to work with the dentist – Edek Fisher was his name. Since I had worked for the Joint in Germany, they knew me there and liked me, and so they hired me. So I started working for them. The bus came on a ship. Everything was built-in: the equipment, a generator, and a big tank for water. That meant you could work where you wanted. We got water, which I always filled up. You could buy gas at the gas station. We had the generator. And we slept in the car. We had two beds: one on top of the other. We drove from one city to the next.

Thus began my work as a dental technician’s assistant. That was all new for me, of course. I learned how to make fillings and helped Dr. Fisher a lot. We went to schools and sorted out the teeth of the students there. We drove to all the areas where Arabs had earlier lived and where many immigrants had settled after the war of liberation; Ramlet or Beersheba, for example. Schools emerged there, as well. It was a giant vehicle and I could drive very well, since I had driven a lot in Germany. We drove everywhere and examined the teeth of every child. If they needed a filling, they got one immediately. We were in Beersheba for a whole week, for example. That was my first time in Beersheba. Everything was new for me. Beersheba was a Bedouin city back then. There were three or four streets and six cross streets. That was it. That was Beersheba. There was an armistice then. You weren’t allowed to get too close to the Jordanian border, since it was still dangerous. There were always a lot of raids – also in Beersheba. They warned us to always be careful. Today, Beersheba is a city of almost 250,000 people.

This relief organization began building homes for mothers. There the mothers learned how to wash their children and how to raise them. Convalescence homes also cropped up. We also supervised these convalescence homes. I met my wife in one of these homes. She was working as a nurse there. I liked her immediately. She had a different job there later. She then went to Ben Shimon – Dr. Siegfried Lehmann founded a youth village there in the 1930s. The youth village was for orphans and the children of recent immigrants. Most of them no longer had parents; they had been killed. There was an agricultural school for the older ones. Shimon Peres was educated there. The

children and young people lived like on a kibbutz. My wife was a teacher there. She had a group of children she had to look after. She had to make sure they were dressed, that they got everything, that they did their schoolwork.

My Wife Shoshana

My wife Shoshana, born Riesenbergs, was born in Milnica in 1924. Milnica was part of Galicia until 1918, which belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and after World War One it was part of Poland. Her father died very early. Milnica was promised to the Russians after the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 1939. The Germans and Russians divided Poland back then. Today the city is in Ukraine. In 1939 my wife was 15 years old. She also learned Russian in school when the Russians occupied the region. When the Germans began their assault on the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the Russians fled and the Germans marched into Milnica. First there were mass shootings of the Jews. Those remaining were deported to a giant ghetto further east where many died of hunger and illness. Shoshana's mother was hidden by a family. The Germans found her and killed her and the people who were hiding her. My wife and her sister Sonja were in the ghetto. My wife and her sister ran into the forest as the Germans began liquidating the ghetto. There are large forests there. There they found a Ukrainian who was already harboring a Jewish family. The Ukrainian made them pay, but he didn't betray them and saved their lives. When the Russians came, they were free. A bit later they went with a transport from Poland to Germany, to the DP camp Neu-Freimann in Munich. Freimann is a district in Munich. My wife immigrated to Israel in January 1949. Her sister and her husband, who she met in Poland, immigrated to Canada. My wife also had a brother, Zwi. When the Germans came, Zwi fled with the Russians to Russia and served in the Red Army, then in the Polish Army. He also survived the war. After the war he immigrated to Israel illegally. Zwi was given the largest Polish honor from General Jaruzelski. Shimon Peres was once in Poland with General Jaruzelski asked him if he knew Zwi.

Shoshana and I were married in 1955.

I kept working for the OSE. Back then the OSE didn't have enough money and we could no longer ride with the mobile dentistry clinic. I looked for another job and found one with Malben. Malben was the main institution of the Joint in Israel. It had built up a network of rehabilitation centers, hospitals, and homes for old people and disabled migrants. I worked there for ten years. In 1969 the Joint handed over all the Malben establishments to the government and concentrated their efforts on improving existing social services through collaboration with the government. I began working as a "maid-of-all-work" in a hospital not far from Tel Aviv. That was a hospital for the chronically ill and for older people. There I was the buyer for vegetables and all the other things. I got the job because the director of Malben, who was head of personnel there, was a Czech, a Dr. Bensch who was with me in Theresienstadt. He didn't know me, but he knew.

My mother's apartment in Hadera had only one room. Starting in 1953, Golda Meir was Minister of Labor then, they began building cooperative apartments in Israel. You had to invest relatively little to get one of those apartments. That's what I did.

A man named Shlomo Stendel had lived in the camp in Deggendorf and had built a sort of kibbutz on the Danube. There they had begun training young Jewish men to be sailors. He was the leader of these youths. Later he immigrated to Israel. I lost sight of him. Then in Israel he was responsible

for the registration of these cooperative apartments. I went to him, he saw me, and because of him I was one of the first to get one of these apartments. It was property, but it was very cheap. I think we had to pay two hundred pounds. There were still pounds then and the mortgages were 1,600 for twenty years. It was a wonderful apartment.

In 1956 our daughter Nava was born in Kfar Saba. In 1959 our son Moshe was born in Jaffa.

We lived there for nine or ten years, partly with my mother. Then I worked for the Joint again and could pay back the mortgage. The restitution payments from Germany also started at this time and life got somewhat easier for many people in Israel. Before we moved here, I bought my mother her own apartment in Givatayim. I filed an application for payments from Germany for her, after my father was killed, and it was approved. We bought her a refrigerator with the first payments. A refrigerator was very important. They manufactured the refrigerators here, but you had to pay in dollars.

The atmosphere in the country was good, despite the poverty and many problems. We had a lot of friends. It was a strange country: parents learned the language from their children, not the other way around. I first learned Hebrew from my children. My wife spoke Hebrew well. She had studied Hebrew in school, so she could interpret. I could make myself understood, but couldn't speak Hebrew. There were many Jews from Germany and Austria living where we were. We met and talked and we celebrated all the holidays together and took trips. It was really a big family. The whole neighborhood! That was very nice. We weren't rich, but we had everything. For example, every Friday we met and everyone brought something to eat. There weren't enough groceries. There were a lot of vegetables and fruit, bread was dirt cheap, but there weren't proper things. And everything was rationed in the beginning. Sugar and oil were rationed. That was already over by 1953.

I also met other people I didn't know had survived. Once, during a bus ride, I saw that the driver had a number on his arm. I looked at him and said, "We stood next to each other."

We were really together in Poland. I think he had 50 numbers more than me. His name is Refisch. Luster and Refisch stood 50 numbers apart from each other in the camp. It became clear that he was also living in Givatayim, like me. We met up a lot - I'm still in touch with him. He has been living in England for a long time. That's how it was, people found each other again.

What I also want to say is that at the beginning the Sabras - the people who were born here - did not treat us very nicely. We were cowards in their eyes. "Why didn't you defend yourselves? You went like sheep to the slaughter." They couldn't understand. That's why we also had little contact with the Sabras. They looked down on us. They weren't the least bit interested in our stories. They didn't understand what really happened. Only in 1961, during the Eichmann trial, did they begin to understand. There was a big turnaround. They began to take an interest.

I had the opportunity to be at the Eichmann trial for a day. It was very difficult to get tickets. The trial took place in the Beit Ha'am in Jerusalem. The first thing that deeply affected me was the prosecution speech from Gideon Hausner, which was broadcast over the radio. His voice gave me goose bumps. He stood and said, "I accuse you and speak here in the name of six million Jews."

Many say they personally encountered Eichmann before the extermination of the Jews. I don't believe it. No could approach him, know one saw him personally; they just know his face. Marmelstein and Loewenherz from the Viennese Jewish Community were connected with Eichmann. They had the chance to speak to him. And I know that our Aron Menczer spoke with him. It was initially about expelling the Jews and the theft of their property. Then it was about murder. I had a good view of him on that day of the trial; the room wasn't that large. He sat in his booth. They were afraid someone was going to shoot him. A German lawyer defended him. But it didn't help him. Eichmann is the only person to have been hanged in Israel. Afterwards they spread his ashes over the sea.

My mother was receiving letters from her brother in America, Jacques, who had emigrated from Galicia in 1914. He wanted to see her and bought her a plane ticket. But she needed a passport and could only get one once I paid the deposit for the iron beds that were made available to us at the start of our life in Israel. I had signed the bill of exchange back then. After I paid everything she got a passport. Then in 1956 my mother flew to America. Her brother lived in Brooklyn and worked as a waiter. Back when we were still in Vienna, he really couldn't help us. He was able to save Uncle Benjamin and his family, but it wasn't enough for everyone. Unfortunately my mother and her brother didn't get along very well, they didn't have much to say to one another. But they saw each other again. My mother returned after a few weeks in America.

My mother could get her bearing everywhere, even in Israel. She was happy to be back home after visiting her brother. I traveled to Europe with my mother again – in 1958, I think. We took a ship to Trieste and then the train to Vienna. We visited a friend in Vienna who my mother was in touch with. She invited my mother. She was a former neighbor, a Jewish woman married to a non-Jew. That's how she was able to survive in Vienna. My mother lived at her place. That was in the 2nd district on Franz-Hochedlinger-Gasse. Her husband was a tailor. She was a Communist, a very serious Communist. We always used to discuss politics.

My mother didn't feel very good in Vienna. We also went to our old apartment. We went to the cemetery where my mother visited her mother. After a while we had had enough and went to Brussels to visit my cousin, Bernhard Westreich. My cousin was a diamond merchant. He survived the war in hiding with false papers in Budapest. His parents were killed in a ghetto near Brzesko where they had lived.

We had a marvelous time with him. He showed us the most beautiful spots, we ate the best things; it was very special. We were in Belgium for maybe two months, then we went home – back to Israel. Bernhard's wife and his three children – a son and two daughters – live in Belgium. Bernhard passed away in 2008 I believe.

My wife and I travelled to America at the end of the 1950s. We took a ship from Haifa to America. All the way to New York. That was one of the most beautiful trips; I will never forget. The journey took 20 days. The ship was called the "Shalom."

One of my friends was a manager with El Al in New York and we stayed with him. I saw all of my old friends who had immigrated to America after the war. We were there for a month and had a really nice time with friends. Then we took the bus to my wife's sister in Canada, in Toronto. She and her husband had a grocery store in Toronto where they worked. After the husband died she frequently

visited us in Israel.

Then I lost my job because the Health Ministry had developed and took over all the hospitals. Then they were all government hospitals. The Joint wanted didn't want this task anymore, anyway. The government then had their own people.

My mother died in 1980 in Petach Tikva. She was 88 years old. She spent the last two years of her life in an old age home in Ramat Gan.

I had kept my Austrian citizenship. There was a man working in the Austrian Embassy in Tel Aviv whose father was the founder of Hakoah. His partner was a distant relative of my uncle's who had passed away in America. The Embassy was looking for a driver. I made a good impression and got the job. That was a really good job. I had very good relationships with all of the Austrian ambassadors. Because I am a victim of the Holocaust, they all had respect for me. I was even allowed to criticize Austrian politics. The ambassadors and embassy secretaries really liked living here. If you've lived here a while, it makes a strong impact. My wife and I also travelled to Vienna a lot. We were also in Germany, and we were together in Theresienstadt.

I saw a lot through my work at the embassy. During the Six-Day-War in 1967, for example, I drove the car through the old city of Jerusalem just as the army had. And then I was in the Golan Heights when the Israelis captured it.

Once, in the 1980s, we went to Vienna and from Vienna to my cousin in Brussels, and then we drove with my cousin to Poland. My cousin was born in Krakow and went to school there. He showed us Krakow. We stayed in a hotel and were afraid the whole time. Afraid of the Poles, afraid of the Communists. The Communists were still in power when we visited Poland. We went to Auschwitz. That was my first time seeing Auschwitz after the war. That was really difficult. That was his first time to Auschwitz. He himself was never in Auschwitz, but his father was murdered there. I had a diplomatic passport through my work. But back then Israel and Poland didn't have diplomatic relations yet, that came first in February 1990.

Auschwitz was difficult for me. My wife couldn't settle her nerves for a week after what she had seen in Auschwitz and Birkenau. It was horrible! We didn't feel good in Poland at all; we were very on edge there.

I told my daughter and son about my past very late. I brought my children to Vienna before they went to military service. I wanted to show them where I was from. And I also started to tell them about myself. I showed them where the persecutions took place. I also told them about my time in the camps, but not so detailed. I only really began to talk about it when my grandchildren were bigger, when they were 14 years old and, like many Israeli children, went to Poland and Auschwitz with their school classes.

After traveling frequently to Vienna, we tried to initiate a large memorial plaque for the ten thousand Austrian Jews who were deported to the east from the Aspern Station in the 3rd district. There was practically nothing there, just a very inconspicuous plaque. That always annoyed me. Still nothing has happened. I have spoken with many politicians about it. I even told the current chancellor, Faymann, and the city councilor for culture and science, Mailath-Pokorny, at a gathering in the residence of the Austrian ambassador in Tel Aviv, that they should be ashamed. I would

really like to live to see a memorial at the Aspang Station.

When my children were still young, travelling was very expensive for Israelis. If you didn't have relatives you could stay with then you couldn't afford it. I could travel with the children because I received part of my wages in an account in Vienna. So they were in Europe at a very young age, which was very nice, since it really broadened their horizons.

My daughter Nava is interested in many things. She studied architecture in Givatayim. She doesn't like the German language, though, and so, understandably, doesn't feel all too comfortable in Austria. My daughter is married to Izchak Kedar. His former name is Koronia, like king. His parents are from Istanbul. They are descendants of the Jews of Spain. Their ancestors, great-grandparents or great great-grandparents, fled to Turkey from Spain. Because my son-in-law works for the police, he had to make his name sound more Hebrew. He has two stars on his uniform. People call the stars falafel. He was a colonel, but now he's retired.

My son lived in Australia for many years. But I didn't want him to stay there and my wife and I brought him back. He's not happy about that, but he's here, and that's important. My son has had a lot of girlfriends but isn't married. He doesn't have children either. Now he's fifty. Maybe the right person will still come around. He makes films for a living.

After I stopped working I needed to find something to keep me busy. That was in 1992. I connected with Gideon Eckhaus, formerly from Vienna, who fled all by himself to Palestine when he was 15. His mother died before the Holocaust, his brother survived in the USA, and his father was murdered in Auschwitz. He is the chairman of the Central Committee of Austrian Jews here in Israel. The Central Committee deals with restitutions, pensions, and citizenship for former Austrian Jews and their kin. In 1992 we began negotiating with Austria. A lot has happened in the meantime. The National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism was founded and Austria signed an agreement to pay 210 million dollars for stolen Jewish property. Additionally, the Austrian chancellor at the time, Schüssel, pledged that Austria would pay, for example, the care and retirement allowance of displaced Austrian Jews now living in Israel. We had and have a lot of people here who are affected. We help these people get their pensions. Today, in Austria, the children of Jews who weren't born in Austria, but in America or Israel, can file and buy into generous pensions through subsequent payments.

Our committee is made up of ten people and meets regularly. Our office is in Tel Aviv on Levy Itzhak Street. This office is our own property, financed by Austria. I am at the office for multiple hours a day – voluntarily, we don't take a salary. We are a registered association and we regularly write reports about our work and publish a newspaper. Austria gives us financial support and we have a good connection to the Austrian Embassy in Tel Aviv. Of course I have especially good connections because of my work with the embassy. I also know the current ambassador.

We have helped many people and they are very, very thankful. They need to average up their working years so that they have around 180 months. They can receive a pension with these 180 months. The pension isn't very big – maybe a monthly sum of two, three hundred euros. What is good and important is that they have the chance if, God forbid, they ever get sick and need help, of receiving a care allowance. I often need help from the records office of the Jewish Community in Vienna. Mr. Eckstein gets information and looks for documents for me. Then I can provide

information to the people who want to know where their relatives were deported, where they died, where they are buried. Or I need birth certificates. A Mrs. Weiss used to be there and I would always have to go to Vienna myself to gather this information. Now it's easier, I just call up during the week and Mr. Eckstein tends to it immediately. I called today, for example, and an hour later I had the birth certificate. He looks immediately and sends me everything by email.

The Political Situation in Israel

I'm of the opinion that the kibbutzim are the foundation of Israel's structure. The Kibbutzniks were pioneers. They were socialists, that was the Socialist Party, the Mapai, the Worker's Party. They had the majority until 1973. Then they lost the election. Any party in power for too long becomes unpopular. People who are in power for too long become corrupt. One party shouldn't just be in power. They need to keep trading off. Democracy reigns in our country, which is very good. The Mapai lost the elections back then, then Menachem Begin came to power. Begin was Ben Gurion's greatest enemy. Begin was a revisionist and was part of the Jabotinsky Party. Most of Begin's followers were Sephardic Jews. Very many Sephardic Jews live in Israel. They had a great culture in Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, everywhere. But they didn't form an elite. Many of the Sephardim are superstitious; they are very pious and still believe in all sorts of things that those of us from European countries had already rejected.

Israel's greatest problem is with the Palestinians. They say we forced them out, which is partly true. But I think that's just how the world is. For example, many Germans had lived in Czechoslovakia, in the Sudetenland. They wanted to return to their homeland after the Czechs had, both fairly and wrongfully, expelled them after World War Two. Did anyone give them anything back? No! Not just one, but many generations had lived there.

The Palestinians want to return to Ramlet, to Tel Aviv, and to Jaffa. In 1948, when they ran away, there were an estimated 450,000 Arabs. Today there are 2 million. They've talked their children into believing that they were born here, that it's their home. They believe they can come here and take everything. They've had that forced down their throats for years. There are 5 million Jews. Surrounding us are billions of Arabs. We can only resist because we are strong. Because we won't let them expel us.

There is an area called Wadi Ara, which is located along the way to Afula, a city in the Jezreel Zone in Northern Israel. There is a nice route there from Tel Aviv through the mountains, through Carmel. You couldn't even imagine how much poverty there was there. The Arabs lived as they had one hundred years ago. If you drive through today you see beautiful houses and proper streets everywhere. There is no difference to the rest of Israel. It was suggested that these Arabs go to the Palestinians and that we could exchange territory. They didn't want that under any circumstances. They didn't want to live under Palestinian rule. The Arabs in Jerusalem living in the Old City get Social Security from Israel. The Arabs don't offer that. If you're old, you can go to an old age home, parents get a child allowance for their children, they have health insurance – all that they've received in Israel. During the 1948 War of Liberation we lost the Jewish quarter of the Old City and the east of the city to Jordan. From 1967 Jerusalem was divided into Israeli West Jerusalem and Jordanian East Jerusalem. The Jews were displaced, the Jewish quarter of the Old City was destroyed, and access to the Wailing Wall – the holiest site in Judaism – was blocked to Jews. They would even shoot; they allowed no one in. During the Six-Day-War in 1967, Israeli troops

recaptured the area. For the first time since the state was founded, Jews could pray at the Wailing Wall. But Israel didn't deny Muslims access to their holy sites, but rather placed the Temple Mount under autonomous Muslim administration. That was 43 years ago.

When I arrived to this country there were a lot of poor Jews. A lot of poor people slept on benches on Rothschild Boulevard. There are poor people again today. Its no different here than in other countries; there are a lot of poor people in Austria, as well. It's just like it is in Austria here; the system is the same.

The Orthodox live amongst themselves like in a ghetto. They want to be with their own. They have their own party they can vote for. If the party gets a lot of votes, they get seats in the Knesset [*Parliament*]. They have a lot of members there. Though, despite that, I don't think Israel will ever become a religious country. Unfortunately the religious people meddle in politics. That's not good: religion is religion; politics is politics. The Chassidim live in a part of Jerusalem. They also live in Vienna. They are anti-Zionists and demonstrate against us secular people, but they take the money for their children. And they cry out against the government. But that's democracy; everyone can express his opinion. You can't do anything about it. But I think they go too far.

At the moment relations between Israel and many states are bad. Relations with Turkey, for example. That is terrible. For a long time, since Atatürk, Turkey was anti-religious. Now, all of a sudden, they are very religious. Just like the Iranians. During the time of the Shah we had good relations and good trade relations. Like with the Syrians. They've persuaded themselves that they will defeat us. We only have enemies around us. It's difficult to live with.

Note: In 1984, Leo Luster received the silver Decoration of Honor for Services to the Republic of Austria for his work in the Austrian Embassy, and in 2002 he received the golden Decoration of Honor as a board member in the Association of Austrian Pensioners in Israel and the Central Committee of Austrian Jews in Israel.